

St. Mark's Vision and Strategy Process 2022
Community Input Review
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St. Mark's sought community input to our vision and strategy process through a series of four Agape conversations during May and June. We also opened an online survey featuring the same questions during that time for people who preferred to share written input. We heard from at least 43 unique members of the congregation (and likely more who did not submit their names on the paper templates used to collect responses). The quality and breadth of the responses we collected suggested rich conversation, careful reflection, and deep listening between members of the congregation.

The questions used to structure the in-person conversations and in the online survey are included in an appendix to this report.

MAJOR THEMES

Things we love, value and appreciate about St. Mark's

We began our conversations together by asking the community to reflect on what it most loves, values, and appreciates about St. Mark's, and about what we perceive to be our church's greatest strengths. The most common responses to these open-ended questions focused on:

- our appreciation for our community and relationships with each other (n=13)
- the beauty of our worship services (n=12), including gratitude for our online services
- our highly competent, friendly and caring clergy (n=11)
- our music ministry, its traditions, and new leadership (n=11)
- the diversity and quality of voices featured in Sunday sermons and Lenten reflections (n=11)
- our children and youth, their involvement in worship, and our children, youth and family ministry leadership (n=10)
- the beauty and utility of our buildings and grounds (n=9)

Many of these appreciations were also seen as major strengths of St. Mark's, in addition to our welcoming culture (n=13), our inreach efforts and programs that support congregants of all ages (n=8); our major community outreach activities through Hotel de Zink, our prison ministry, and Project WeHope (n=6), and our church's financial, organizational, and general psychological health (n=5).

We also asked about beloved traditions, and heard that our community really appreciates special celebrations that punctuate the liturgical year, including (in order of number of responses) the Easter vigil, Holy Week activities, the greening of the Church and other Advent activities, Pentecost, Shrove Tuesday, and other Lenten activities. We also heard appreciation for our women's and parish retreats, our Agape gatherings, and within worship, our creeds, Anglican traditions, and the special way in which we celebrate communion around the altar.

We heard deep appreciation for some of our cultural strengths, including:

- “our focus on love”
- our “authentic connectedness when things are good or not so good”
- “our openness to questions” and “exploration,” and “that it’s ok to not have all the answers”
- that our church “tries to meet people where they are”
- that our church “feels like a place that values my whole family,” and that when “so much Silicon Valley life feels isolated, I can bring tiredness and family needs here”
- that we have “empowering” and “generous” clergy who share leadership roles with others
- That we are willing to wrestle with hard problems like the “massive divide between the queer community and the church,” homelessness, structural racism, environmental issues, international conflict, etc.

Challenges and opportunities to change, adapt and evolve

When these conversations took place in May of 2022, we were still a community reeling from the effects of Covid. Many responses to open-ended questions about challenges and pain points focused on Covid-related issues, including concerns about how older and/or immunocompromised people might feel about convening again in person, especially with small children who may not effectively mask during our services; laments about the loss of the 8am service; and especially, concerns about the noticeably smaller numbers of people in attendance during the late spring. Some of these concerns may already be in the process of resolution, but our Covid-related future is unpredictable.

Looking at the bigger picture, our community’s most often-identified challenge was burnout among lay leaders (n=7). As one respondent said, “there are more opportunities than we can fill with a meaningful number of volunteers, making it difficult for those who are participating in any particular activity to do their best job.” Other respondents noted that tiredness and burnout are things we are facing in our jobs, schools, and daily lives — not just at church. But as we discern our future priorities and set achievable goals, we will have to acknowledge this challenge and proactively address it.

Other major challenges included concerns about long-term trends in membership and attendance (n=5), especially of young adults, children and families (n=5). Some respondents shared that they longed for more variety and experimentation in our liturgy and/or more accessible music that invites easier congregational participation and features more diversity in style (n=5). Participants also hoped that we might experiment with ways to help kids feel more included in our services, and with children and youth programming based at St. Mark’s that might happen outside of Sunday mornings (n=5).

Aspirations and action

When asked about where our aspirations might be outpacing our current actions, fewer participants offered ideas, but those who did focused on three areas:

- Increasing diversity within our community to include more people who are LGBTQ+, differently abled, non-native English speakers, from marginalized racial and ethnic groups, and from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds
- Converting from commitment to impactful action on issues of racial injustice and becoming beloved community, which might need to include some hard conversations about “how can we use our wealth and resources to do more”
- Serving our community in ways that are needed, wanted, and effective; that build on our strengths; and that don’t burn out our volunteers and lay leaders

These three areas represent major opportunities for experimentation and growth, as they appear to have significant buy-in from the congregation but need more work and new ideas to become actualized goals.

Addressing barriers to participation and leadership

Some respondents recommended steps we could take to help each other overcome barriers to committing our time and talents in ways that could help our community flourish:

- recognizing that time is, for many of us, our most limited resource, and adapting our meetings and structure of commitments accordingly
- scaling back our expectations sometimes, especially when few people are participating or willing to lead
- committing ourselves to fewer activities and/or offering more “limited time” activities that might better accommodate unpredictable schedules
- structuring outreach around specific volunteer opportunities rather than around continuing advocacy that we don’t have the resources for right now
- embracing change and deliberate experimentation
- having conversations with our ministry teams, committees, and small groups about what we could stop doing or consolidate, even if that means disbanding the group itself
- hiring an outreach coordinator who could help us discern the best paths to community action and social justice work, and coordinate and “rightsize” our activities for our current church community

Visions of a flourishing church

When asked about what it means for a church to flourish, respondents painted a picture of a church growing in its membership numbers, but also in diversity, parishioner involvement, and the strength of our relationships with each other. Members of a flourishing church community would feel “happy,” “welcomed,” “excited to come to events and services,” and would seem to each other to be “friendly,” “kind and caring,” and “willing to face conflict head-on.” A flourishing church community would be “able to speak to those hostile to church,” “feel safe and inclusive,” “nourish connection and sense of belonging,” and be authentically interested in listening and learning from each other and those who are different from us. It would also *energize* its community members while providing a peaceful respite from a busy world, help its members serve as “messengers and ministers” in our communities, and “integrate outreach and social justice into all aspects of church.”

A few (but only a few) respondents expressly described a flourishing community as one that might be more deeply engaged in Bible study and Christian education/formation, and as one that would be willing to “wrestle with the things we are called to do [and not do] as Christians.” Building on earlier responses, we can also assume that a flourishing church is one that is financially and operationally stable, continually strives to keep “growing and serving and doing better,” offers engaging preaching and programs to people of all ages, and values “the stream of tradition” while also “being bold to experiment in new and unique ways.” A flourishing St. Mark’s would also be led by “wonderful clergy” “with a sense of humor” who “embrace Christian values,” and make its buildings and grounds “a lovely space that the community can use.”

Towards a thriving St. Mark’s of the future

In line with the themes above, responses about what a thriving church in 10-15 years would look like included more young people as an indicator of a healthy, growing community; services and support for congregants across the lifespan; improved inclusion of, and involvement with, diverse communities that are not well represented at St. Mark’s today; continued cultivation of beauty in our physical spaces and in worship; and remaining welcoming to new members and all who visit or are curious about our community.

When offering new ideas, contributors were creative and visionary in some of their responses, imagining a St. Mark’s that might directly offer more services to the community around us, potentially including childcare, housing assistance, new immigrant assistance, weekly meals to people who need them, gathering spaces for people who want to listen to and learn from each other, and music and educational programs that could serve our broader community. Other contributors suggested increasing our local interfaith involvement, strengthening relationships with local university communities, and building community service into the core of what it means to belong to the St. Mark’s community.

Some respondents suggested that we take the long view towards creating a flourishing St. Mark’s community through “commitment to maintaining a strong program for children and youth” that would “develop compassion and empathy” in our younger generations. One respondent suggested that we challenge ourselves to “be on the right side of history” in terms of environmental integrity and social injustice, even though that might feel risky. Another respondent pushed back against too much focus on a long-term “cathedral building” mindset, noting that “Scripture seems to emphasize much more that we have to accept God’s gifts and live in the here and now. It is tempting to build for the future alone, but we should not forego the good we can do today. The most important asset we have in our Church is the community of congregants.” Taken together, these comments remind us that a thriving church will be one that balances care for each other in the here and now with longer-term discernment, experimentation, and change.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

This document summarizes and synthesizes what we heard in the community input phase of our strategy and vision work, but does not expressly recommend strategic priorities or actions beyond those ideas submitted by respondents. The next step is for vestry, clergy, commission

leaders, and key staff to review this document, and then to gather in small groups to discuss their reactions, thoughts, and specific ideas for their own ministries or domains of activity within the church. The following questions can help guide those conversations.

Reflection Questions

- 1) Did anything surprise you in the summary of community input? Don't forget to think about things you *didn't* see but might have expected to.
- 2) Reflect on what you read about what our community *appreciates* and *values* about St. Mark's. Are there *one of two* of these things that you think we need to prioritize *church-wide* in the coming three to five years? If so, why?
- 3) Reflect on the bigger picture challenges our community identified. As you think about these challenges and the way they play out across our church community and its activities, are there *one or two* challenges that you think we need to address at a *church-wide* level rather than (or in addition to) primarily through our ministries? Are there any particular solutions you think we need to explore?
- 4) Many respondents referenced how tired many of us are, how we long for respite and peace, and how little time we seem to have now to commit to regular church activities and leadership. Are there *church-wide* cultural, organizational, or process changes that you think might reduce the barriers to participation or provide respite for our community?
- 5) Reflect on the visions of a flourishing church above. As you think about visions for flourishing for our church as a whole, what are *one or two* churchwide goals for becoming a thriving, flourishing community over the next three to five years that you think would energize our leadership and community, and which feel doable given who and where we are today?
- 6) Most strategic plans naturally gravitate towards growth, goals and aspirations. But there are times in community life when managed retreat or strengthening core foundations are the more appropriate focus. If you had to divide 100% of our church's energy for the next 3-5 years up across the following domains, how would you do so?
 - ___ % Managed retreat: Doing less so we can do better
 - ___ % Strengthening core foundations: Doubling down on what we do well and/or what's most important to our community now
 - ___ % Organic growth: Taking the next steps on paths we are already on or can see clearly
 - ___ % Aspirational experimentation: With foresight and planning, pursuing bold (and potentially risky) ideas that could fundamentally change the nature of who we are or what we do

Questions for ministry team discussions

Note to Vestry members: These are DRAFT questions. Please feel free to suggest edits, especially about ways to better align these with our emerging goals for vestry liaisons and the conversations we hope they will have with their ministry teams.

These questions are meant to help our action-taking organizations (our commissions) in the church “bubble up” their own priorities and goals, guided by the themes that emerged from our community input. We will also ask vestry and clergy to identify their major “top-down” strategic priorities and goals, and look for places where they meet. We can then articulate a few major strategic priorities for the next 3-5 years that are well informed, actionable, and hopefully, achievable. This isn’t the only way forward from here, so if any of you have suggestions for different next steps, please let me know.

- 1) Did anything surprise you in the summary of community input? Don’t forget to think about things you *didn’t* see but might have expected to.
- 2) Reflect on what you read about what our community *appreciates* and *values* about St. Mark’s. Which two or three of your commission/committee/organization activities reflect or embody those things that our community values most?
- 3) Of these activities (in 2), if you had to prioritize one thing that your ministry could continue doing well in the coming year, what would you choose?
- 4) Covid has been difficult for all of us. What is one thing you can celebrate about the way your ministry managed or adapted during Covid? What is *one* thing you are still struggling with that you think you might be able to address in the coming year?
- 5) Reflect on the bigger picture challenges our community identified. Which of these challenges does your ministry feel most acutely? Were there any ideas in the “Addressing barriers to participation and leadership” section that you think could help address your challenges?
- 6) If you had to identify just one challenge in your ministry to try to address or improve this year, which would it be? What are the first steps that you would take to explore or address it?
- 7) Can you identify one thing your ministry could *stop* doing as a way to free up time and resources to invest or experiment elsewhere?
- 8) Many respondents referenced how tired many of us are, how we long for respite and peace, and how little time we seem to have now to commit to regular church activities and leadership. What is one thing that your ministry could do to reduce the barriers to participation or provide respite for our community?

- 9) Reflect on the visions of a flourishing church above. As you think about visions for flourishing for your ministry, which one or two aspirations would you prioritize as important and achievable over the next three to five years?
- 10) Good strategic plans feature shared churchwide goals that commissions/committees/organizations can each pursue in their own way or in collaboration with others. What are one or two churchwide goals for becoming a thriving, flourishing community over the next three to five years that you think would energize you and your colleagues, and which feel doable given who and where we are today?